

William Hooker's masterpiece of fruit painting achieves perfection in this nineteenth-century rarity

William Hooker, *Pomona Londinensis*. London: privately printed, 1818. 16 3/4 inches x 13 1/4 inches (425 x 337 mm), 102 pages, 49 color plates.

William Hooker was the finest English painter of fruit and subtlest transcriber of structure through technique. The *Pomona Londinensis* is his masterwork, a collection of 49 hand-colored aquatint engravings of the choicest fruits to be found in the markets, private gardens, and nurseries of Regency London. Hooker was essentially a portraitist, recording not some vague ideal but commemorating instead what was unique about “the fine summer of 1811.” *Pomona Londinensis* was the sequel — as far as city location — to his *Paradisus Londinensis* (1805–08), an anthology of beautiful plants with text by British botanist Richard Anthony Salisbury.

Hooker was a pupil of Franz Bauer, the renowned first botanical painter-in-residence at Kew Gardens, and was later named official draftsman to the Horticultural Society of London, precursor of today's Royal Horticultural Society. Hooker's post required some attention to flowers, but as a member of the Society's Fruit Committee, fruit was his specialty — fruit on the bough, not as museum or market specimens. Seldom has the weight of suspended fruit, the spring of cherry stems, or the background of foliage been so unerringly conveyed. Hooker even compounded his own pigment for leaves, still known as “Hooker's Green.”

As a pomological illustrator he was fortunate in his era. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries marked the golden age of fruit growing among wealthy amateurs, ensuring a supply of specimens to paint and of customers for the published plates. The subjects of *Pomona Londinensis*, in contrast to the rustic specimens that Hooker drew for *Pomona Herefordiensis* (1811), were metropolitan fruit grown against walls, or on manicured single-trunked trees. This individual attention fostered the production of urban or suburban fruit that is almost immaculate.

This was also a period of fine printing, by such masters as Didot, Bulmer,

and Bensley, in which typography complemented draftsmanship. With a colored plate facing a leaf of letterpress, the well-proportioned block of well-inked type could respond to the shape of the engraving, creating page openings of nearly unparalleled beauty.

This one of the rare copies with a higher finish, printed on large paper (further enhancing the effect, as with a matte). Signs of engraved line or aquatinted surface, apparent in ordinary copies, have all but disappeared in this large paper issue. A wet brush drawn over transitional areas softened the edges, harmonizing the whole and giving an effect that is astonishingly close to that of an original painting. This superior copy is from the Edward E. Hills and Florence Hopkins Hills Collection of Botanical and Ornithological Works of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

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